The Impression of a Deeper Darkness: Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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> Knowledge which goes so far as to accept horror in order to know it, reveals the inner horror of knowledge, its squalor, the discrete complicity which maintains it in a relation with the most insupportable aspects of power. I think of that young prisoner of Auschwitz (he had suffered the worst, led his family to the crematorium, hanged himself; after being saved at the last moment—how can one say that: *saved?*).
>
> **Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster***

Opening in 1935 against the looming background of World War II, Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2001) centres on the guilt felt by the protagonist, Briony Tallis, for the consequences of her erroneous accusation that Robbie, her sister's new boyfriend, molested their young cousin Lola. The novel is a meditation on the act of testimony, beginning with Briony's initial accusation and extending ever outwards as, over the following years, she begins to rethink the reliability of her position as a witness. Each new chapter forces the reader to revise his or her understanding of what was revealed earlier, sowing seeds of doubt that make the text blossom into a set of irreconcilable uncertainties. James Harold writes that *Atonement* "reveals that narrative imagining is not static or unified, but dynamic and multi-polar," as it skilfully manipulates the imprecision of

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Mathews2.indd 147 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

language by playing with the complicated link between knowledge and ethics (130). While the novel demonstrates the potentially tragic results of hasty judgment, its increasing ambiguity self-reflexively turns this logic of shame back onto the reader, so that the book's conclusion leaves us, as witnesses, to ponder our own ability to testify about the story that Briony has just described.

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At the centre of the book's narrative is a secret, an obscured truth, which McEwan uses to lure the reader into the story. Like Briony, the reader is pushed toward a moral judgment by this act of concealment, even though the information necessary to make an ethically informed decision is withheld. Each secret contains two possible destinies, writes Maurice Blanchot, "The stratagem of the secret is either to show itself, to make itself so visible that it isn't seen (to disappear, that is, as a secret), or to hint that the secret is only secret where there is no secret, or no appearance of any secret" (137). The crucial quality of a secret, in other words, lies in its form rather than its content, making the source of its attraction entirely negative. The paradoxical result is that the positive content at the heart of the secret, the evidence that can be gathered and analyzed, is effectively sidelined by the act of obscuration that frames it.

McEwan's awareness of this paradox is evidenced by his symbolic exploration of the empty, purely formal secret. In the novel's first chapter, for instance, the reader is told that Briony's fascination with storytelling is rooted in her "passion for secrets" (McEwan 5). All of Briony's passions—her storytelling, her love of secrets, her penchant for miniaturization—stem from an obsession with order, in both a moral and a physical sense. Her secrets are made up of things she has literally sanctified from the everyday objects of her life:

> [I]n a prized varnished cabinet, a secret drawer was opened by pushing against the grain of a cleverly turned dovetail joint, and here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook written in a code of her own invention.[…] An old tin petty cash box was hidden under a removable floorboard beneath her bed. In the box were treasures that dated back four years, to her ninth birthday when she began collecting: a mutant double acorn, fool's gold, a rainmaking spell bought at a funfair, a squirrel's skull as light as a leaf. (5)

Briony's treasures possess a symbolic value: each provides the promise of something greater, a promise that is cancelled by its own formal status. The acorn, for example, is a seed that has lost the ability to germinate; the

Mathews2.indd 148 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

fool's gold promises a fortune that lacks any real economic value; and the rainmaking spell is worthless in a secular world that no longer believes in magic. As Briony herself acknowledges, her secrets are not secrets unless they possess the allure of hidden knowledge: "[H]idden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems could not conceal from Briony the simple truth: she had no secrets" (5). Her secrets, like her treasures, are transparently counterfeit and thus lack the power to draw in a sophisticated observer.

A second exploration of the purely formal secret is to be found in Mrs Tallis's meditation on why moths are drawn toward light. Standing at the entrance to the drawing-room, she watches two or three moths flying around a lamp, wondering why these creatures are drawn to the place where they are most vulnerable to predators. She recalls the explanation given by a science professor she once met:

> He had told her it was the visual impression of an even deeper darkness beyond the light that drew them in. Even though they might be eaten, they had to obey the instinct that made them seek out the darkest place, on the far side of the light—and in this case it was an illusion. (140)

The moths capture the central paradox of the formal secret—they fly into the symbolic light of reason, exposing themselves to a likely annihilation, all in pursuit of a deeper but illusory darkness. The secret, in other words, is a promise of knowledge, but it is a promise the emptiness of which may forever remain a mystery. *Atonement* is built on this basic formal structure: if there *appears* to be a secret, even if it is entirely illusory, the result of an authorial fabrication, the reader is nonetheless drawn compulsively to know, to judge, and, above all, to moralize.

McEwan thus draws a line, in ethical terms, between two manifestations of the unknown: the mystery and the secret. The mystery involves an unsolvable riddle characterized by its anonymity (no one knows who is responsible for it) and contingency (no one knows how it came about). One example of a mystery in *Atonement* is provided by Cecilia's attempts to reconstruct her family's genealogy. McEwan writes:

> She had made a halfhearted start on a family tree, but on the paternal side, at least until her great-grandfather opened his humble hardware shop, the ancestors were irretrievably sunk in a bog farm of farm laboring, with suspicious and confusing

Mathews2.indd 149 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

> changes of surnames among the men, and common-law marriages unrecorded in the parish registers. (20)

The genealogy's status as obscured knowledge makes the Tallis family tree a mystery rather than a secret. There is no identifiable act of concealment, and no one is capable of answering for its opacity. The secret, by contrast, is defined by the possibility of responsibility and accountability. The secret retains the ability to be brought to light by those who understand its status as a secret, even if they are not involved in the act of concealment. The "smoothing hand of time" that McEwan references throughout the novel, however, eventually transforms every secret into a mystery (152). Briony's manuscript, for example, is to be published only after her death, when she can no longer be responsible for its implicit accusations against both herself and the Marshalls. As the possessors of the secret are withdrawn by the passage of time, the secret loses the possibility of responsibility and becomes a mystery, although the boundaries between the two always remain blurry.

For McEwan, therefore, knowledge is the critical factor that turns the wheel of modern ethics. Indeed, the etymology of "innocence" is based on this very idea; the Latin origin of the word is a compound of the negative prefix "in" and the verb "*agnoscere*," which translates as "to acknowledge, recognize." The police investigations narrow Briony's choice: "Either she saw, or she did not see" (160). But the relationship between knowledge and innocence cannot be broken down into the simple either/or of a binary relation. The Aristotelian principle of contradiction, so perfectly symmetrical in its logic, is brought into question throughout *Atonement*. As the uncertain line between secret and mystery demonstrates, the structure of knowledge is less straightforward than knowing or not knowing. In Briony's case, for example, mystery and secret are intricately interwoven: while an act of concealment (her false accusation) takes place, Briony's true motivations for her action remain murky. Her subsequent probing of this event as she grows up leads to its transformation from mystery into secret and from there to the self-accusations that underlie the narrative. Briony's story is therefore complex in its ethical implications, for while the revelation of her *secret* accuses her, the *mystery* of her motivations simultaneously excuses her—yes, she committed a crime, but her youthful naïveté meant that she acted without "full" knowledge. Like Oedipus, she is both guilty and innocent because of this asymmetry in the structure of knowledge.

Mathews2.indd 150 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

The secret has the same effect on modern ethics as the "deeper darkness" on Emily's Tallis's moths. Whether or not a crime has been committed, the very act of concealment inscribes one into an economy of guilt. The logic is simple: if there is nothing to hide, then why the need for concealment? The secret, therefore, forms the paradoxical heart of the economy of guilt and innocence. To imply that someone is hiding something is simultaneously to accuse them of a greater, unimagined guilt. There is a Kafkaesque logic to this notion, one that cynically places the burden of proof onto the accused. The secret, therefore, becomes a key strategy in the modern construction of authority. In a world of appearances, it is the *performance* of experience and authority that counts, and it is because of this logic that the teenage Briony trusts her confession to the craggy-faced detective. His impassive features form a kind of mask that conceals all emotion. Nonetheless, as with the secret, there is a paradoxical structure to the detective's honesty. Whereas the secret's act of concealment implies guilt, this unflinching portrait of experience and sincerity denies all possibility of concealment. The detective is a character whose surface integrity serves as a guarantee to Briony that no darker secret lies beneath. McEwan writes: "The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes" (159). But Briony's—and later, the reader's—faulty interpretation of the situation is based on a misreading of the rhetorical surface of things, the falsely symmetrical assumption that concealment equates with guilt and transparency with integrity.

McEwan's novel thus possesses a complicated perspectivist structure, a tactic that requires the reader continually to revise their view of particular events and characters. As such, Brian Finney writes, "The novel's epigraph, a quotation from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, serves as both a warning and a guide to how the reader should view this narrative" (70). Like Austen, Finney argues, McEwan is playing with the presuppositions of his readers, luring them into making erroneous assumptions based on their expectations about the novel's theme and genre. There is a cultivated purpose to this technique: it epitomizes the struggle between an artfully fragmented piece of literature and the reader's implicit desire to unify it through judgment. The text further alludes to the influence of Virginia Woolf on Briony's writing style (for it is Briony, after all, who turns out to be the internal "author" of *Atonement*). In making these gestures toward Austen and Woolf, McEwan seems chiefly concerned with the ethical implications of their fictional strategies, a point underlined in Cyril Connolly's rejection of Briony's original manuscript, which he criticizes for

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Mathews2.indd 151 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

being too close an homage to Woolf's style. McEwan's use of perspective would more accurately be described as more Nietzschean than Woolfean, therefore, shifting from one character to the next in order to question the moral limitations of their finite points of view. The novel is thus filled with echoes and contrasts in which McEwan compares one interpretation of an event to another. The reader's perspective on the behaviour of the twins, for example, depends on whether it is Lola or Robbie speaking. In Chapter 10, after being told about Robbie's letter, Lola says that she thought Robbie was a "monster" from the moment she saw him shouting at the twins by the pool (McEwan 112). Earlier, after his mother expresses sympathy for the twins, Robbie's thoughts reveal that he only yelled at them because they tried to throw his wheelbarrow into the pool. In Chapter 13, to give a more telling example, Briony recasts her swimming lessons with Robbie as evidence of his "maniacal" behaviour. Robbie's own view of the matter is withheld until Part Two, when Briony's erratic behaviour during the swimming lessons, and her damning confession of love for him, is revealed. McEwan repeatedly uses these surface examples to alert the reader that the objectivity of the narrative voice is deeply suspect.

These warnings are essential to a sophisticated interpretation of the novel, especially because the most crucial points of comparison in the novel are regularly passed over without foregrounding of any kind. For instance, when Robbie comes to apologize for his obscene letter, Cecilia leads him into the library. As they face each other uncertainly, Cecilia makes a symbolic gesture with her hands: "She turned aside and made a steeple of her hands to enclose her nose and mouth and pressed her fingers into the corners of her eyes" (125). Her action has a forceful resonance: it foreshadows, for instance, the incident at the island temple (if we connect the temple to the synecdoche of the steeple); it symbolizes the immanent covenant between the two lovers (insofar as the gesture has religious, sacramental undertones); most importantly, the hands, arranged in this manner, provide an improvised frame that emphasizes Cecilia's limited perspective on the events that follow. But the hand motion also has a darker significance, as Cecilia unconsciously replicates Paul Marshall's own gesture at the end of Chapter 5. Paul is awoken from an incestuous, erotic dream by the noise of the Quincey children playing in the nursery. His intentions toward Lola are framed by the sinister context of this dream. "'D'you know,'" he says to her, "'you remind me of my favorite sister'" (58). Then, after giving her one of his chocolate bars, "Marshall sat back in the armchair, watching her [Lola] closely over the steeple he made with his hands in front of his face" (59). Whereas Cecilia's view is limited to the

Mathews2.indd 152 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

space *between* her fingers, Paul peeps *over* the steeple's phallic structure to take in the object of his desire, hinting that he possesses knowledge beyond the framework constructed for the reader. Throughout the novel, McEwan shows the way in which the frame determines and limits one's judgment of events. As Finney writes of Briony, "Style, she discovers, really does have ethical implications" (72).

As well as playing with the notion of perspective, McEwan also echoes Friedrich Nietzsche's argument in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) that the Christian ideas of sin and forgiveness are modeled on the psychological interplay between creditor and debtor. Sin is not just an offense against God; it is a debt that, under the old law of Moses, must be repaid. The best translation of the Lord's Prayer, which pleads with God to "forgive us our debts," captures neatly this economics of guilt. The problem for humanity becomes one of equivalence: what can it possibly do to pay God back for the sin of the Fall? Or, in the case of the novel, what can Briony possibly do to rectify the effects of her false testimony? Nietzsche writes: "Indebtedness towards *God*: this thought becomes for him [the guilty person] an instrument of torture.[…] This represents a kind of madness of the will in psychic cruelty which simply knows no equal: the *will* of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a point beyond the possibility of atonement" (72–73). Briony's desire to make up for her misdeed is thus representative of a broader economy of guilt that, for Nietzsche, characterizes the psychology of modern humanity.

The root of this "madness," as Nietzsche indicates, is inscribed in the economic structure of modernity. The history of the Turners' relationship with the Tallis family, for example, is strongly overcoded by monetary exchange. Robbie's parents start out as servants in the household, but with the departure of his father, Ernest, this arrangement takes on a different and more complicated aspect. Grace Turner's usefulness to the family transcends her role as a servant, a fact that the family acknowledges through various gifts—Jack Tallis presents her with the deeds to the bungalow, Grace is kept on in a new capacity, and Robbie's education is paid for. In this initial setup, atonement loses its usual negative tinge. The Turner and Tallis families are united, made "at one" through this mutually beneficial relationship. Robbie is elevated from being the son of a servant to the social equal of the Tallis children, a move that lays the ground for his future romance with Cecilia. But the economic tensions underlying this move quickly become visible after Briony's accusation. Mrs Tallis, the reader discovers, initially opposed her husband's decision to fund Robbie's education. McEwan writes: "'Nothing good will come of

Mathews2.indd 153 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

it' was the phrase she often used, to which Jack would respond smugly that plenty of good had come already" (142). However benevolent Jack's actions may be, it is impossible for him to overcome fully the fact that his liberality places Robbie in a position of obligation. While according to the letter of the law Robbie's education is paid for freely, in good will, Jack's reframing of his protégé as a "good investment" unconsciously implies that the return on his money—Robbie's first at Cambridge, his ambition to go to medical school—has paid off well. Thus the benevolence of the Tallis family evaporates once Robbie has been accused, and Emily Tallis, who doubted the value of their "investment" in the first place, is the most forceful and relentless in the prosecution of Robbie.

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In considering these economic relationships, the reader must also take into account that Briony's "debt," her "crime," as McEwan calls it throughout the novel, is framed by the context of World War II. McEwan brilliantly interweaves the family drama with the movement of history, making each set of crimes reflect on the other. In terms of sheer atrocity, the war easily dwarfs Briony's misdeed, but the reader never loses sight of her shameful action. For a novel that draws from some of the key historical events of the twentieth century, however, there is surprisingly little discussion of the Nazis or the rise of fascism. McEwan implies, instead, that the fascist mindset has pervaded modern culture at a much deeper, unconscious level. The militarization of the nursing practice is one prominent example in *Atonement*. In his book *Male Fantasies* (1977), for example, Klaus Theweleit examines the culture of the Freikorps, the interwar paramilitary culture that, he argues, was crucial to the formation of Nazi Germany. Theweleit contends that the female counterpart of the "white nurse" was an indispensable part of the proto-fascist mindset. He writes: "Mother, sister(-of-mercy, nurse), and countess all in one person. Such is the holy trinity of the 'good' woman, the nonwhore. Instead of castrating, she protects. She has no penis, but then she has no sex, either" (95). Briony's decision to enlist as a nurse during the war allows her to experience at first-hand this militarization of civilian culture. Briony's interest in writing, to provide a further example, is tied to a fascistic obsession with order. McEwan writes: "She was one of those children possessed by the desire to have the world just so" (4). The point is not that Briony simply reflects the fascist mindset, even though her childish but calculating nature would seem to fit the stereotype. Instead, the narrative of *Atonement* ends up being an account of Briony's lifelong struggle with her internal attraction to fascism—the "fascism in us all," as Michel Foucault calls it—with its external patterns of order and symmetry (xiii).

Mathews2.indd 154 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

This aesthetic is gradually ruptured in Briony's consciousness as the novel unfolds. When she first conceives her play *The Trials of Arabella*, for instance, each character is dramatized in her own mind, neatly balancing the actions of the others.[1] When her cousins rehearse the play, however, she discovers, to her horror, that their representations of the characters are different from hers. This realization creates a break in Briony's personality, shattering the aesthetic symmetry she had imagined to be at the heart of life and literature, a symmetry that constitutes the foundation of her narcissistic, totalitarian outlook. A second rupture occurs with Robbie's obscene letter. Having discovered the worm of negativity in the fruit of knowledge, Briony becomes convinced that her childish perspective was not wrong as such. The world as it was conceived is symmetrical, but it has "fallen" from this original state of purity. The evil lies in knowledge, which provides the possibility of contradiction. McEwan writes, "The very complexity of her feelings confirmed Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit. What fairy tale ever held so much by way of contradiction?" (106). Within this second point of view, the function of literature is to provide an artistic ideal, a glimpse of the beautiful symmetry of the world that existed before the blight of the negative and the impure intervened. This view of the world thus necessitates a scapegoat, a figure that can be blamed for the dissolution of symmetry. If that figure can be eliminated, purity will be restored to the world. For the Nazis, this ideal was encapsulated by racial and cultural purity, requiring the elimination of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the physically and mentally disabled, and so on.

The focus of Briony's search for purity is Robbie: the obscene letter, coupled with her ontological rupture, becomes the ammunition she needs to take aim at this destroyer of the aesthetically perfect worlds of her childhood. He is to be the sacrifice, the scapegoat that restores her world to its pre-lapsarian state. But the asymmetry of knowledge intervenes at every point in Briony's project. The cornerstone of ethics is knowledge, so that to know is to be responsible, to be answerable for one's actions. Yet there

1 McEwan weaves a Quixote motif into the fabric of *Atonement*. Apart from Briony's apparent need to reshape her life according to the madness of literary form, for example, the name Arabella is probably borrowed from Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote, or The Adventures of Arabella* (1752). Furthermore, the scene in which Robbie returns with the twins perched on his shoulders—the family has the visual impression of him as being some sort of strange "giant"—recalls the famous moment in Cervantes's original novel, when Don Quixote mistakes a cluster of windmills for an army of giants.

Mathews2.indd 155 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

remains the possibility of action without knowledge, especially because "full knowledge" is inevitably a relative term. But the asymmetrical peculiarity of innocence is that it is self-reflexive: true innocence, as William Blake famously demonstrates, does not even know that it is innocent. The reader sees Briony emerging from this state at the very beginning of the novel, when her innocence is ruptured by the realization that each person possesses a complex individual consciousness just like her own.

> Such was Briony's last thought before she accepted that she did not understand, and that she must simply watch. Unseen, from two stories up, with the benefit of unambiguous sunlight, she had privileged access across the years to adult behavior, to rites and conventions she knew nothing about, as yet.[…] She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. (37–38)

The crossing of this line from innocence to experience is so difficult to trace that McEwan qualifies this intense psychological transformation in her character by suggesting that, sixty years later, Briony remains unsure whether or not the melding of the advent of experience and the scene by the fountain could be just a convenient fictional reconstruction of her memory. The third and final step in this process, therefore, is Briony's understanding of the asymmetry of knowledge, in which she comes to understand the infinite ambivalence of her "crime."

It is her torturous longing for atonement that places Briony in a kind of psychological "hell." McEwan symbolizes this agony in a subtle but consistent foregrounding of the symbolic number three. The most obvious point of reference for this motif is the Christian notion of the trinity, the "three in one" of the Godhead, which recurs throughout the text: the three broken pieces of the vase, the three participants in the fountain scene, the three soldiers marching to Dunkirk, the wedding at the Church of the Holy Trinity, the three aspirins that Briony takes in the epilogue, the three main sections of the novel. Apart from its religious connotations, however, McEwan uses this motif to create a repeated, subliminal allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The number three pattern is also employed by Dante—the three parts of the *Divine Comedy*, which are each divided into thirty-three cantos (with the exception of the *Inferno*, which has one extra canto, making a total of one hundred cantos overall, a function paralleled by the epilogue in *Atonement*)—and employing the poetic schema of *terza rima*. Underhand references to Dante are scattered throughout the novel: when Briony sees Robbie toward the end of the novel, she imagines prison

Mathews2.indd 156 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

"the way people imagined the different torments of hell" (322); when working as a nurse, Briony is commanded to "lead fifteen men up to Beatrice [the name of Dante's lover] ward" (276); and in the epilogue, Briony's taxi takes a shortcut through "the Inner Circle of Regent's Park" (335). Hell is not a place for Briony but a mental state of torment that is shaped and conditioned by her crime. The most important dimension of these references to Dante, however, comes from recalling that the deepest and most sinister punishment is reserved, famously, for the traitors (Judas, Brutus), and it is here, at the centre of the web, that Briony installs herself, as both accuser and accused.

The novel's most famous shift of perspective is the revelation that Briony is the author of the account in its entirety. Earl G. Ingersoll writes: "McEwan's epilogue radically subverts the reader's knowledge of not merely the 'content' of the preceding narrative but its provenance as well" (248). The reality of the characters as the reader has seen them—in both a psychological and a concrete sense—is tainted by this newly gained knowledge of Briony's authorship. How are we, as readers, to believe in the validity of the innermost thoughts and motivations of these characters when, as it turns out, they are told from the perspective of someone who has a clear interest in how we judge the story? Whereas Briony's narrative draws the reader into the lives of the characters through the omniscient perspective of a third-person narrator, the revelation of the story's partiality upsets this relation of intimacy. McEwan thus explores the paradoxes of human judgment for two purposes. Internal to the text, the experienced Briony, the distinguished writer, is able to explore her failings, in particular the quickness to judge that characterized her youthful self. The teenage Briony is, as it were, "sacrificed" in the novel. She replaces Robbie as the novel's scapegoat: captured in the pages of her lifelong work, her effigy in the form of a novel is sent out into the world as a final act of atonement after her death. But lest we judge her too hastily, the novel's structural twist is meant to engage the reader in a reversal of perspective. The reader's judgment of Briony suddenly becomes pre-emptive, insofar as we have shown *ourselves* to be hasty in our morality and our willingness to judge.

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There is a final trick up McEwan's sleeve, however, a twist that is only hinted at in the epilogue, which suggests that the novel in its entirety may be a formal and empty secret. The revelation that the account is Briony's problematizes the characterization of key figures in the novel, and she concedes this fact by offering her readers alternative, fictional endings for the two lovers, although her choice of an auspicious conclusion is now ren-

Mathews2.indd 157 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

dered as specious as her original crime. The impossibility of deciding on a single, easily defined destiny has been the lesson of her lifelong project:

> The problem with these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. (350–51)

But to the wary reader Briony's comments should remain unsatisfactory, a narrative ruse designed to project once again, perhaps, the impression of a deeper darkness. The key piece of evidence is contained in Cyril Connolly's rejection letter to Briony for, as Pilar Hidalgo points out, it takes "a careful second reading of the novel to perceive that Connolly's corrections […] have been silently incorporated into the body of *Atonement*" (87). Having just read the first draft of the novel that is to become *Atonement*, Connolly congratulates Briony for her stylistic innovations but suggests that her story needs some deeper set of implications for its characters: "If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion?" (295). Connolly's battery of suggestions forces the reader to ask some crucial questions of their own about McEwan's text: Did Briony really commit the crime on which the entire narrative hinges? Is the novel perhaps nothing more than a complex but empty secret, designed to play on the reader's compulsion to head, like one of Emily's moths, toward the impression of a deeper darkness? There is no final answer to these questions, for McEwan hints that the novel may be nothing more than an act of concealment that the modern reader, armed with the pessimism of the modern age, is destined to interpret, without further proof, as a sign of guilt.

There is, however, another way of interpreting this uncertainty, one that connects to the larger historical backdrop of *Atonement*. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), Giorgio Agamben examines the testimonies of those who survived the Nazi death camps. He argues that there is an inherent ambivalence in the structure of testimony that places the witness both inside and outside the events they describe. Refuting the argument that those who survived the death camps were motivated by an inner heroic quality, Agamben contends that survival in the camps was entirely a matter

Mathews2.indd 158 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

of contingency, independent of will or personal strength. In spite of this lack of control, Agamben observes, the common sentiment amongst the survivors of Auschwitz is shame. He writes:

> To be ashamed means to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed.[…] Here the "I" is thus overcome by its own passivity, its ownmost sensibility […]. In shame, the subject thus has not other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame. (105–06)

In the context of Agamben's philosophical project, Auschwitz is the historical culmination of the inherent contradictions of the political logic of sovereignty, and while McEwan's novel rarely addresses the Nazi atrocities directly, his concerns intersect implicitly with Agamben's through Briony's guilt. Her ambivalent participation in the process of testimony is a reflection of her shame at being thrown into a world over which she has no control and yet to which she must bear witness as if it were of her own making. It is this dual movement of becoming and annihilation in Briony's character that Agamben identifies as the entry point into a world of guilt and forgiveness.

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Mathews2.indd 159 9/6/2007, 10:07 AM

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